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SUBJECT: ARMENIA'S YEZIDI KURDISH MINORITY: A SMALL BUT
RECEPTIVE HAVEN FOR WOULD-BE KURDISH TERRORISTS

REF: A) 06 YEREVAN 1424 B) 06 YEREVAN 1484 C) YEREVAN

274 D) YEREVAN 528

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Classified By: Poloff Masha Herbst for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) The mayors of two Yezidi Kurdish villages, spoke openly to us during a May 31 visit about the fact of PKK (KGK) presence in Armenia, telling us that wounded PKK fighters from neighboring countries receive medical treatment in Armenia. We also discussed the complicated issue of Yezidi Kurdish nationality in Armenia, and emerged with a clearer picture of the community's self-identity: an unassimilated group that exists peacefully as a subset of Armenia's citizenry, but that also maintains strong ties with the broader Kurdish nation, and sympathizes with the PKK. There seems a clear rural/urban divide, with rural dwellers embracing a Kurdish national identity, and pro-PKK sympathy, that their Yerevan-based brethren disdain. END SUMMARY.

¶2. NOTE: Armenians and local Yezidi Kurds alike refer to the Kongra-Gel/KGK/Kadek as the PKK, and we will be guided by the local terminology in this cable. END NOTE.

POOR CONDITIONS

¶3. (U) Ria Taza and Alagyaz are two Yezidi Kurdish villages in Armenia's Aragatsotn marz (region). Half of the marz's 22 villages are populated by Yezidi Kurds. The two villages -- about five minutes apart -- straddle the main road about an hour west of Yerevan, and just a short distance from the Turkish border. Conditions there are poor. Ria Taza Mayor Ahmed Broyan told us that because the village's winter lasts nine months out of the year, there is no agriculture. The villagers raise cattle for meat and milk. Neither Ria Taza nor Alagyaz have potable water. Absent gas, like in many poor villages in Armenia, the villagers burn cow dung bricks for their winter fuel.

¶4. (U) Though the villages appear to be as poor as any in the Armenian countryside, Mayor Broyan told us that only three or four men from the village travel to Russia for seasonal work -- an odd disparity in a region where many villages lose

nearly all their able-bodied men to construction jobs during the warmer months. Residents of Alagyaz tend not to travel to Russia for work either, preferring instead to live off remittances from relatives abroad, according to Mayor Aziz Mghoyan.

15. (S) Mayor Broyan was late for our meeting, so we talked to his sons before he arrived. Rustap, one of the mayor's sons, told us that the PKK had "united all Kurds throughout the world," and that the organization was present in Armenia.

He said the organization counted some Armenians among its members (presumably Yezidi Kurds and not ethnic Armenians, but he did not elaborate). Rustap told us that there were probably about a dozen Armenian Yezidi Kurds currently fighting with the PKK, among them a 27-year-old man from Ria Taza. (NOTE: We had heard previously (ref B) that the PKK had discontinued efforts to recruit fighters here. END NOTE.) Rustap's brother, Ishkhan, confirmed reports we had heard previously (refs B, C and D) that the PKK's Yerevan organization, the Kurdistan Committee, organizes protests against Turkey or in favor of Ocalan. Ishkhan vehemently denied earlier reports that the Kurdistan Committee pays villagers to participate in the protests.

WOUNDED PKK FIGHTERS TREATED IN ARMENIA

16. (S) In his living room, sparsely decorated but for an Abdullah Ocalan calendar and a small Ocalan poster, Mayor Broyan told us that the question of whether the PKK was in Armenia was neither Armenia's business, nor the United States' business. When pressed, he confirmed that the PKK was in Armenia, and boasted that wounded PKK fighters received medical treatment in Armenia (something we have heard before -- ref B). When asked how many, he requested that Poloff stop taking notes. Once the notebook had been

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laid aside, we tried to pin him down on numbers. Given the choice of dozens or hundreds, Broyan told us that hundreds of fighters from Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq came to Armenia for treatment. He said that those who were severely wounded received initial treatment here, before being sent to Europe. We were unable to get details on how fighters entered and exited the country, or even on where exactly they were treated. Broyan told us he could take us to see some of them, but that he would have to ask permission first. When we asked who would need to give him permission, he said there was a "center" in Armenia that coordinated the treatment. We asked what the Armenian government thought about this, and he said, "We do it through our own community; we don't tell the government."

17. (C) Alagyaz Mayor Mghoyan was more careful in his discussion of the PKK. While he spoke openly about the fact that there was a PKK office in his village, and even volunteered to take us there, he told us that the office's purpose was to put on concerts and hold cultural events. We took him up on his offer to show us the office, however, when we arrived there, we were told that the PKK representatives had just left for Yerevan and would be gone for the rest of the day.

YEZIDI, KURD OR YEZIDI KURD?

18. (C) Most of our contact with Yezidi Kurds before this visit had been with those who live in Yerevan and who pointedly do not self-identify as Kurds, but simply term themselves Yezidi. Aziz Tamoyan, the self-proclaimed leader of all Yezidis, and Hasan Tamoyan (no relation), a Yezidi radio personality, disavow their connection to the Kurdish people, and claim to speak for the Yezidi population. They

are among the apparently small minority of Yezidi Kurds who claim that their language, Yezidiki, is distinct from Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji). However, we are told the only real difference between the two languages is their alphabet: Yezidiki is written in Cyrillic letters, while Kurmanji uses either the Latin or the Arabic alphabet.

¶9. (C) Broyan and Mghoyan had harsh words for the two Tamoyans: "illiterate," "self-important," "scum of the nation." The mayors said that Yezidi Kurds and Muslim Kurds share a nationality, but differ in religion. They claim the word "Yezidi" refers to the religion - a pagan religion based on Zoroastrianism, which involves sun worship and a proscription on eating lettuce. Both mayors were clearly very offended that the two Tamoyans purport to speak for all Yezidis (including Yezidi Kurds).

COMMENT

¶10. (C) It looks now as though the two Tamoyans do not speak for anyone but themselves (and possibly for the dozen people who accompanied Aziz Tamoyan to the Embassy during an April 27 protest -- ref D). The designation "Yezidi Kurd" appears to be a more accurate description of the community as a whole than simply "Yezidi." Armenians tend to use the words "Yezidi" and "Kurdish" interchangeably to describe the community.

¶11. (S) Mayor Broyan's estimation that "hundreds" of PKK fighters receive treatment in Armenia is almost certainly an exaggeration; we were unable to convince him to be more specific about the number, or about whether it referred to those being treated currently as opposed to all those who have ever been treated here. Though Broyan took pains to describe the fighters as "wounded," we believe that it would be difficult to conceal from Armenian authorities significant numbers of battle-wounded Kurds receiving treatment in public hospitals. However, PKK fighters seeking non-combat-related general medical care might more easily slip below authorities' radar. It is most likely that our interlocutors, as clear PKK sympathizers, may well wish us to believe that the organization is more robust, and better organized and funded, than is actually the case.

¶12. (C) The clannish and skittish Yezidi Kurd minority can be difficult to get close to, and we have not had as many opportunities as we would like to cultivate these relationships. The community is also fairly suspicious of

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Armenians and the Armenian government. We have requested an IREX-sponsored American scholar (sociologist/anthropologist/ethnographer) come to Armenia for a 30-day study visit to learn more about the Yezidi Kurdish community, and have had positive early indications, so we hope to learn more in upcoming months.
GODFREY